

THE ABJECT SUBJECT AND THE OTHER'S GAZE IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE HOLLOW OF THE THREE HILLS*

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Abstract



This paper reads Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Hollow of the Three Hills" through key concepts from Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. I employ Lacan's notion of the Other and Kristeva's notion of the abject to discuss the suffering that the female subject undergoes in the story. I argue that the young lady's obsession with an implicit sense of guilt places her in a deadlock and turns her into an abject subject who embraces death as an escape from the impossible demands of the Other. Within the same line of thought, I suggest that the text, as a sociocultural product, displays unconscious, conflicting forces that stand at opposite poles in their demands from individuals.

Keywords: the abject, the chora, the gaze, Hawthorne, Kristeva, Lacan, the Other

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Artistic merit and psychological depth

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Hollow of the Three Hills" (1830) has a straightforward plotline. A young lady meets a very old woman, probably a witch, in a secluded place outside town and close to the woods. The former asks the latter to provide information about the family she has permanently left behind. She places her head on the crone's lap to hear accounts of her loved ones through auditory visions. The last vision, showing her child's funeral, is so traumatic that when it ends, the lady does not raise her head, implying that she has died of overwhelming grief.

Since literally no action takes place in the story, some critics have raised doubts about its artistic value. Doubleday (1972) considers "The Hollow of the Three Hills" and other stories Hawthorne produced early in his career "at best apprentice work" (p. 58). Others, however, have observed a degree of complexity that might go unnoticed at first glance because of the apparent simplicity of the story's plot structure. Bewley (1963) indicates that this short story "is not as simple as it appears," and Hawthorne's better and "more complex" fiction, produced later in his career, "carries no radical quantity, either of meaning or technique, that is not clearly indicated in this little work, elementary as it is" (p. 142). Some critics have gone a step further by linking its rather static narrative and psychological depth to the modernist stories that appeared during the early decades of the twentieth century. Iftekharudin et al. (2003) argue that "The Hollow of the Three Hills," along with some other mid-nineteenth-century shorter fiction by authors such as Melville, which were "at first thought to be merely sketches," displayed "plot structures similar to modern stories" (ix). Aside from concerns regarding the story's plot structure, there have been references to this story as an early demonstration of Hawthorne's artistic skills. For Burhans (1961), while this short story is "slight" in terms of "length and incident," it is "important as a starting point in studying the development of Hawthorne's thought and art" (p. 286). Edgar Allan Poe's evaluation of "The Hollow of the Three Hills," which appears in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, is one of the earliest assessments that marks it as a work with several merits that demonstrate the writer's noticeable genius. Poe (1984) praises the story not simply because it displays "higher talent than any of the other pieces" in the collection, but also because it is "an excellent example of the author's peculiar ability" (p. 575). For Poe, no detail appears unnecessary in this short story: "not only is all done that should be done, but ... there is nothing done

which should not be" (1984, p. 575). In this sense, Hawthorne's work proves to be a carefully crafted story produced with mathematical calculation.

Even if critics diverge in their appraisal of the artistic quality of "The Hollow of the Three Hills," there is consensus that it is a profoundly psychological story dealing with the unconscious mind. The young lady appears as a tormented individual, imprisoned—even paralyzed—in a lingering past that continues to haunt her. The weird, surreal setting in which the story takes place and nightmarish visions that the crone produces to restage what happened when the young lady left her house create a story that is static in physical action, yet dynamic in psychic energy. In my reading of Hawthorne's "The Hollow of the Three Hills," I first explore the text through basic Lacanian concepts such as desire and fantasy to see how a close reading of the text depicts the central character of the story as a split subject of desire, traumatized by the Other's desire. In the subsequent sections of this article, I consider the text as a juncture where opposing unconscious forces demand societal roles from people living in New England in the 1830s. I further draw on Kristeva to explore how the Symbolic, as a reservoir of social mores, is shaped by certain sociopolitical forces that define womanhood and establish normative codes of behavior. Transgression of such codes would turn the female subject into an abject being, an isolated outcast who becomes repugnant to the community in which she lives. The abject individual dies twice: first, when she is ostracized by her society; and second, when she chooses death over life to pay for what she has done. The significance of this analysis lies in its departure from moral-allegorical interpretations of Hawthorne's story, offering instead a psychoanalytic examination of abjection as a gradual, structural condition of subjectivity rather than simply a form of social judgment. I finally argue that "The Hollow of the Three Hills" is not a story produced by an individual author with a clear-cut message, but a discourse formed by various unconscious, paradoxical forces that represent the Other of its era.

The traumatic return of the past and the subject's impasse

"The Hollow of the Three Hills" places the reader in a strange, rather impossible setting. The narrator informs us that the story occurs in a distant past where "fantastic dreams and madmen's reveries were realized" as part of everyday reality (p. 285). The narrator's statement sounds double-edged because it could refer to the author signaling to the readers to suspend realistic codes of reading and take fantasy for granted, yet it

could also suggest that fantasy holds a mirror to the individual's psychic reality. Even if such a statement places the work within the borderline between fantasy and reality, its depiction of the impact of certain actions on the character's psyche feels real, even too real, especially when surreal imagery provides access to truth.

As in a psychoanalytic session between an analysand and an analyst, the young lady and the crone meet "at an appointed time and place" (p. 285). The young lady is "pale and troubled" and urges the witch to give her news from her family:

Whence I come it matters not;—but I have left those behind me with whom my fate was intimately bound, and from whom I am cut off for ever. There is a weight in my bosom that I cannot away with, and I have come hither to inquire of their welfare. (p. 287)

The young lady's disturbed face, her conversation with the crone, and the content of the three visions imply that she has committed a sin—most probably adultery—and has lost all hope of being reunited with her relatives. Hawthorne's focus on the past of his characters is a dominant element of his fiction. Reznick (2022) highlights that both in his short and long fiction, Hawthorne was deeply concerned with "how the past influences the present to shape—and at times delimit—individual actions" (p. 105). His characters are, to some extent, conscious of the outcome of their actions, but there are always background forces which go beyond human understanding. Hawthorne illustrated how "actions do indeed have consequences," but "he was also skeptical about an individual's ability to fully understand the implications of his or her actions, and he often gestured to powerful forces operating beyond human ken" (Reznick, 2022, p. 105). The young lady's desire to know stems from her limited knowledge of how her actions affected her family; yet she is even more curious to see how the community in which she lived reflected on her actions during her absence.

The human obsession with the past has always been a subject of interest in myth and literature. When uncertainty haunts one's mind, one has no recourse other than digging into the past to see a small trace of truth. The mythical story of Orpheus and Eurydice and Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* are good examples of the way ancient Greeks understood how a moment of uncertainty would burn the individual with the desire to uncover truth. "The Hollow of the Three Hills" appears as a universal story about the

impact of a traumatic past on the subject's psyche. The visions are vitally important for our understanding of the young lady's deeper feelings as they reveal the reason why she does not want to return home. They serve as free associations in the form of auditory dreams—they do not take place visually but through the ear—giving the readers details on the young lady's relationship with her family. Poe (1984) argues that Hawthorne employed a genuine strategy by providing the ear as the medium through which the images of the past reappear:

It has been the fashion to describe, in such cases, a mirror in which the images of the absent appear; or a cloud of smoke is made to arise, and thence the figures are gradually unfolded. Mr. Hawthorne has wonderfully heightened his effect by making the ear, in place of the eye, the medium by which the fantasy is conveyed. The head of the mourner is enveloped in the cloak of the witch, and within its magic folds there arise sounds which have an all-sufficient intelligence. (p. 575)

The process of recalling the past through the crone's voice captures all the voices the lady had heard during the earliest days of her life. In a few seconds, she recalls the deepest layers of her unconscious: "For it seemed as if other voices—familiar in infancy, and unforgotten through many wanderings, and in all the vicissitudes of her heart and fortune—were mingling with the accents of the prayer" (p. 288). The recollection takes place through the ears, but everything is displayed "as vivid as if painted to the eye" (p. 288). If this text is the symbolic projection of the deepest layers of the unconscious, the adopted narrative strategy—the displacement of the senses through which the ear is preferred to the eye—serves a crucial function. An explication of such a narrative strategy through Lacan's notion of the gaze seems helpful here.

A visual projection of the most traumatic events paralyzes the subject: it produces a moment of pure anxiety where one, overwhelmed with an emptiness inexplicable through the logic of the Symbolic order, hangs between life and death. The split subject of desire needs recognition from the Other, an approval indicating to her that she is on the right path. This occurs through the gaze, "a gaze imagined by [the subject] in the field of the Other" (Lacan, 1998, p. 84). The gaze through the voice is preferred over the eye because any visual encounter would go beyond the limits, thus moving the subject towards *jouissance*, a situation that would put her mental health at risk. The young lady's insistence on such an encounter with the Real of her desire, which is too painful to endure,

is essentially masochistic, even suicidal. Gollin (1979) argues that the lady's strong wish "to know the worst" through such "auditory hallucinations" is rooted in her "self-punishing desire to confront the consequences of her guilt" (p. 104). The return of trauma is facilitated by the crone. Hawthorne describes her as "an ancient and meanly dressed woman, of ill-favored aspect, and so withered, shrunk and decrepit, that even the space since she began to decay must have exceeded the ordinary term of human existence" (p. 285). Her face, body, and speech produce a grotesque mix of a soothing (m)other and a vengeful Other. She represents the maternal thing (*das Ding*), "the prehistoric, unforgettable Other, that later no one will ever reach," which turns into the *objet a* (Lacan, 1997, p. 53). The third vision puts the lady in a deadlock because when she discovers that her child is dead, she hears the voice of the Other, in the form of funeral mourners, scorning her because of her crime and her final escape from home. At the climax of this vision lies the return of the Real: the order which "resists symbolisation absolutely" and appears only as a fissure in the Symbolic order (Lacan, 1991, p. 66). The Real looms large and threatens the lady's mental health when she is placed within an unsafe distance from the *objet a*.

When the lady discovers that she is no longer the object of the Other's desire, her life is emptied of meaning. In a moment of crisis, she realizes that she is wanted no longer; thus, even before she dies biologically, she understands that she must choose death as the ultimate solution. One can clearly see the vicissitudes of the Other: in a theatrical performance reminiscent of an execution by electric chair, the individual undergoes a gradual death. This is an ironic moment in which the lady experiences total humiliation so that the Other obtains *jouissance*. One can see this through the last few words of the story: "'Here has been a sweet hour's sport!' said the withered crone, chuckling to herself" (p. 292). The crone's indifference to the young lady's miserable condition encapsulates the paradoxical structure of their encounter.

The sociopolitical unconscious of the text

There are often different, even incompatible ways to read literary works. While a story could be read within a universal framework, wherein every element would be applicable to people from around the world regardless of the time period in which they live, it could highlight certain standards of behavior in a particular time and place. A timeless, universal story may be informed by various factors including those that shape a

certain community's moral codes. In short, the unconscious context holds sway over the text. This aligns with Fredric Jameson's idea that "the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (2002, p. 64). The invisible ideology is not necessarily something that the author is aware of, yet the text contains a society's deepest, almost unidentifiable forms of discourse. Jameson draws on Althusser's idea that history is an absent cause and mingles it with Lacan's concept of the Real to point out

that history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious. (2002, p. 20)

Simply put, history as an absent cause is always present in the context of a narrative text. A work of fiction is a site of divergent forces which, though not visible in the text, are fundamentally effective in shaping it as a discourse.

In his reading of "The Hollow of the Three Hills," Johnston (1997) argues that Hawthorne's short story could be read in two rather conflicting ways: either as "a timeless story about the consequences of transgressing domestic order" with its focus "on the young woman" or as a temporal story about "the deforming power of a sexually repressive social order" with its focus "on the old woman" (p. 6). In this case, Hawthorne's "message is difficult to resolve" (Johnston, 1997, p. 7) because such views might cancel each other out:

... Hawthorne in his art constructs a space that both is and isn't historical space, a space where the timeless world continually flip-flops with the historically constructed world of his own culture. In doing so, he calls into question the totalizing impulse of any atemporal vision yet at the same time places in relief the narrowness of a temporal cultural focus that denies the existence of the timeless. (Johnston, 1997, p. 9)

Whether read as a simple story about ethics of domestic life or as a more complex account of how culturally informed forms of power affect gender roles, Hawthorne's work is shaped by certain historical forces that are no longer present. My point here is not that a work of art is a reflection of its own age, because such a view implies that it holds a mirror

to its context, providing a clear, direct connection to the world around it. There are various forces running in the background that move in diverse, even opposite directions, making it impossible for a work to be a simple reflection of its own time. The text is not simply the product of the author's imagination working in a vacuum. Hawthorne, as an author, is no longer available for us to ask about his intentions. Even when an author is alive, asking him about the ultimate message of his work proves pointless. Hawthorne's short story, I argue, more than being an autonomous literary work that narrates the story of the young lady and her never-ending anxieties, is a discourse that voices the complex sociocultural unconscious of its own time.

There is no conclusive evidence about Hawthorne's views on women. Easton (2004) points out that when one reviews Hawthorne's rather long career, one can find "evidence of both feminist and misogynist views" in his fiction and non-fiction (p. 82). Considering "inconsistencies and shifts" about women in Hawthorne's works, we could posit that "there simply is no certainty about what he believed" (Easton, 2004, p. 82). Such contradictory views on women support the perspective that Hawthorne's art does not necessarily represent what he thought about them. Therefore, we need to consider his work in relation to the way dominant voices on womanhood were functioning at the time the story was written.

The other side of the Symbolic and the abjection of the female subject

The social order of New England during the 1830s and after stipulated certain codes of behavior for women. Digging into the historical context of Hawthorne's short story reveals that there were certain ideals of womanhood at the time:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. (Welter, 1966, p. 152)

A woman was expected to be pious and tie her piety to purity. Losing one's sexual purity would have turned her into an outcast, an essential nothingness, an abject body to be discarded: "the loss of sexual purity was a 'fate worse than death'" (Brannon, 2017, p.

47). If a woman committed adultery, she had limited options at her disposal. As Welter (1966) indicates, “to be guilty of such a crime...brought madness or death” because without purity any woman was “no woman at all, but a member of some lower order” (p. 154). Such a cultural framework deems sexual purity essential to any definition of womanhood.

In “The Hollow of the Three Hills,” the young lady still views herself within the gender roles defined for her as it is “characteristic of the period’s ideas about women” (Easton, 2004, p. 83). Living within a society that imposes strict laws on women leaves no space for anyone who violates such standards; it turns her into an abject body, a site of pure suffering. She has left the house because she is now an outcast who does not fit within the bonds of the Symbolic. Reading the setting through religious symbolism, Burhans (1961) points out that “Hawthorne consistently emphasizes the Trinitarian aspect of these hills” to finally assert that “the lady’s punishment is ordained of Heaven to be death in a Hell of her own making” (p. 290). The lady’s miserable ending, however, should not be attributed solely to her own actions, because even if there is a Hell, it is a construct of the Symbolic, the voluminous body of law and language that introduces the subject into a world of lack and desire. For Kristeva (1982), the semiotic chora, as “a strange space” or “a receptacle,” precedes the Symbolic order (p. 14). The chora is “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their states in a mobility that is full of movement as it is regulated” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 25). The maternal chora is the stage in the subject’s life where she embraces the drives and denies the logic of desire. Kristeva (1984) refers to Freud’s idea that “the most instinctual drive is the death drive” to argue that the semiotic chora “is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death” (1984, p. 28). The aggressive energy of the chora disrupts and destabilizes the Symbolic.

A closer look at Hawthorne’s short story reveals the ways in which the semiotic chora disturbs the Symbolic. The location where the two characters of the story meet is a deep hollow surrounded by three hills. Hawthorne’s descriptive language fuses layers of mystery and horror into the story. More than anything else, however, the portrayal of the hollow basin evokes death, decay, and evil. It is a place where one can see “nothing but the brown grass of October” on the ground, “masses of decaying wood,” and “sluggish water at the bottom” (p. 286). The basin presents the irrational, unconscious forces that come to the fore. It is where dreamlike imagery produces a rupture in reality and the

Symbolic loses its solid texture. Aside from the surreal setting and its dreamlike aspects, the chora could be seen in the preference given to the vocal over the visual, i.e., sound functioning as semiotic disturbance. Here, the crone has an important role. The lady puts her head on the crone's lap, as a symbolic return to the womb and the maternal chora. This return to the maternal space is neither reassuring nor stabilizing; rather, it pushes the subject to the threshold of dissolution. The crone employs an auditory medium to convey the bitter truth, reminding us of pre-linguistic articulations of the semiotic chora.

On the other side of the equation stands Kristeva's concept of the abject. Kristeva (1982) indicates that the most basic form of the abject appears in "loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung" (p. 2). When individuals see such scenes of disgust, they fail to assimilate them thus they expel them: "... I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). Kristeva argues that the subject's experience of abjection takes place when an external force threatens her being; therefore, she attempts to skip it because she cannot absorb it:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. (1982, p. 1)

Individuals are unable to keep the abject at a safe distance. Kristeva describes the abject as a "real threat" that "beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" since it "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, p. 4). In "The Hollow of the Three Hills," the vision of the coffin frames abjection as a dissolution of bodily boundaries, marking a traumatic encounter in which the lady becomes one with the corpse in a state of nausea.

In the overwhelming process of abjection, the subject realizes that existence is based on a void:

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection

of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5)

The play of signification is a metaphoric realm in which words replace things. Abjection separates us from the seemingly meaningful world of signification and exposes us to the essential lack at the core of our existence.

The morbid setting foreshadows the collapse of the Symbolic in the young lady. The rupture begins at the precise moment she is asked to lay her head on the crone's knees—a critical instant of hesitation in which “the anxiety, that had long been kindling, burned fiercely up within her” (p. 287). The encounter with “the muttered words of a prayer” proves so overwhelming that her initial thought is to evade it: “Let me flee,—let me flee and hide myself, that they may not look upon me!” (p. 287). With the return of the voice, however, she “hush[es] herself, and [is] still as death” (p. 288). The paralysis of the body is the result of her increasing anxiety. A step-by-step consideration of the three visions shows how the lady gradually succumbs due to the community's intolerance of her actions. Here, abjection emerges as a progressive, dynamic process which starts with social exclusion, turns into bodily confrontation, and ends in the subject's breakdown where the Symbolic fails to function properly. The story's framework surrounds the female subject and bombards her with scornful language. The parents describe her as “a daughter, a wanderer they knew not where, bearing dishonor along with her, and leaving shame and affliction to bring their gray heads to the grave” (p. 288). In the middle of the first vision, the narrative comes to a halt to intensify the lady's anxiety: “they alluded also to other and more recent wo, but in the midst of their talk their voices seemed to melt into the sound of the wind sweeping mournfully among the autumn leaves” (p. 289). When the first vision ends, the lady is filled with “a sense of intolerable humiliation triumphing over her agony and fear” driven solely by her concern that the crone might have heard her parents' voice (p. 289). Meanwhile, “strange murmurings” grow, “shrieks” emerge, the collective voice of feminine “singing” gives way to “a wild roar of laughter,” and the ensuing “groanings and sobs” produce “a ghastly confusion of terror and mourning and mirth” (p. 289). This grotesque combination of divergent voices sets the scene for the more powerful encounters that follow.

The second vision, in which the husband recounts a “woman’s perfidy, of a wife who had broken her holiest vows, of a home and heart made desolate,” (p. 290) reverberates with overtones of an implicit sense of adultery. This vision is the precise moment that triggers the community’s abjection of the lady through words that reposition her as an adulteress. While the first and second visions project her family members’ bitter words, the third vision is a synthesis of all voices that reflect harshly on her actions. The last vision shows a funeral procession, a reference to the recent death of her child, thus setting up a scene where anxiety goes to extremes:

Stronger it grew and sadder, and deepened into the tone of a death-bell, knolling dolefully from some ivy-mantled tower, and bearing tidings of mortality and woe to the cottage, to the hall, and to the solitary wayfarer, that all might weep for the doom appointed in turn to them. (p. 291)

The first instance of abjection occurs when the lady faces the coffin of her dead child. The coffin contains the corpse, recalling Kristeva’s statement that “it is the human corpse that occasions the greatest concentration of abjection and fascination” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 149). She loses her ego and merges with the corpse. Almost at the same time, the second instance of abjection takes place when the people attending the funeral find the young lady disgusting because she failed to properly play the roles she was supposed to act upon:

And though no voice but his was heard to speak aloud, still there were revilings and anathemas, whispered but distinct, from women and from men, breathed against the daughter who had wrung the aged hearts of her parents,—the wife who had betrayed the trusting fondness of her husband,—the mother who had sinned against natural affection, and left her child to die. (p. 291)

Her encounter with the other side of the Symbolic, in its most terrifying form, places her at a point of no return; thus, she dies of grief instantly. Yet, while an invisible force hurls a brutal attack at the deviant female subject, another less visible—and probably more impactful—voice can be heard that laments the suffering and death inflicted upon a solitary woman. This is the collective voice of political activists such as Margaret Fuller, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone, who were already fighting for the rights of women.

Conclusion

In *The Hollow of the Three Hills*, the lady faces the return of trauma through the gaze of the Real. The gaze as voice is a way to protect her from the heavier visual encounter; however, she insists on going back to the core of trauma. Such a painful return brings her death. The descriptive language and the structure of the story move toward the semiotic chora, as an attempt to produce a rupture in the Symbolic. In the meantime, the abject appears in the most critical moment of the story: the collective voice of the mourners in the funeral procession brings the lady's spiritual death, and her encounter with the corpse of her child causes her biological death. The story explores sin and punishment on the surface, but its deeper concern is the subject's disintegration at the level of the Symbolic through abjection. If a woman's sense of guilt is a cultural construct shaped by a society that demands she perform her prescribed roles, any violation of such standards turns her into a misfit. However, culture is not a monolithic set of norms approved by every member. There is a clash in the deepest layers of the story between opposing forces of the era mediated through textual practice. Within the chaotic unconscious of the story, one can discern a struggle between those who want to set boundaries and those who want to go beyond them.

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